

IMPOVERISHMENT OR EXPANSION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE?

The impact of marketing and digitization on sourcing practices and editorial content

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ABSTRACT

In order to assess the impact of commercialisation and digitization on journalists' sourcing practices, we set up a content analysis of the secondary sources and information actors in the news output of four Flemish newspapers over a period of 10 years (2000-2010). From a longitudinal methodological perspective we match our results with reflexions on the expanding or shrinking mediated public sphere. The analysis shows little to no shifts through time. Mainstream sources remain dominant although citizens gained some input over the years. As far as we can observe, Flemish journalists modestly refer to pre-packaged sources or information subsidies from pr actors. The opportunities for a more diverse source use offered by Web 2.0 applications have not yet been fully implemented in their newsrooms. Overall we can conclude that the public sphere as presented in the sourcing practices of journalists in Flemish newspapers is remarkably stable in the decade between 2000 and 2010.

KEYWORDS

public sphere; sourcing; commercialisation; digitization; content analysis; newspapers

INTRODUCTION

The new duality in the current media landscape reflects first on the growing impact of commercialisation and the increasing use of institutional, official sources and pre-packaged information (Lewis et al., 2006; Buijs et al. 2009). Second, new technologies and especially Web 2.0 applications might invite a more diverse source use which may result in a more balanced media access for a wider range of actors, including actors in the civil society, individual citizens and alternative news sources (Dahlgren, 2005; Habermas, 2006; Brundidge, 2010). Our research aims to reveal the underlying mechanisms of the news production process by identifying the prominent sourcing practices and sourcing actors in the newsrooms of four Belgian newspapers. From a longitudinal methodological perspective we analyse our results considering reflections about possible impacts on the public sphere. We focus our research on content analysis of prominent sources and actors in the news output over a period of 10 years (2000-2010). The results are analysed in a comparative perspective facing popular and quality newspapers.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND NEWS ACCESS

In the view of Habermas (1989), the mass media are part of the public sphere, which is *“an arena, independent of government (even if in receipt of state funds) while also being autonomous of economic interests, which is dedicated to open-ended discussion and debate, the proceedings of which are open to entry and accessible to scrutiny by the citizenry”* (Papathanassopoulos, 2011, p.24). In his original account on the public sphere, Habermas (1989) considered the mass media as facilitators of this democratic process by disseminating reliable and high quality information of a wide range of sources. In other words, the free and equal representation of the viewpoints of all citizens or communities in the news is a precondition for a democratic public sphere. Yet, ample studies have shown that mainstream or institutional actors – politicians, government, companies, experts and journalists – dominate the news at the expense of non-mainstream actors as citizens or non-governmental organisations (Beiler and Schmutz, 2006; Carsten, 2004; Davies, 2008; De Keyser, 2010; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Herman and Chomsky, 2002). Habermas recognised that the growing complexity and rationalisation of society and the growth of the mass media in the course of the 20th century have transformed the public sphere into a *“court before which public prestige can be displayed – rather than in which critical debate is carried on* (Habermas, 1989, p.201)”. It seems that vertical communication between mass media that are highly influenced by state and capital has replaced horizontal communication between citizens. In addition Habermas acknowledged the existence of counter or advocacy public spheres that are able to challenge the mainstream public sphere. This can be exemplified by the rise of non-governmental organisations such as Greenpeace, the establishment of (online) alternative or citizen media, or the presence of advocacy voices in mainstream media (Dahlgren, 2005; Downey and Fenton, 2003).

When studying news access one has to make a distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sources. Primary sources or information actors are the people or institutions that pass information on to journalists. Secondary sources are the information channels that information actors use to spread their message and journalists to gather news (De Keyser, 2010). We distinguish on the one hand between politicians, government, companies, experts, journalists, citizens and non-governmental organisations (primary sources), and on the other hand between news agencies, media brands, public relations and social media (secondary sources).

SHRINKING PUBLIC SPHERE?

COMMERCIALISATION AND CHURNALISM

Since the 1980s, the media industry has growingly been affected by elements of commercialisation, that is on the one hand tabloidization and on the other hand

standardisation or industrialisation of news production. The aspect of industrialisation of newsbeat production is a core element for the transformation of the public sphere. First, research on newsroom practices describes the growing impact of commercialisation induced by deregulation and liberalisation and the appearance of commercial broadcasters in a globalised media market (Davis, 2000b; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Webster, 2011). Second, research demonstrates that a fall in advertising revenues combined with shattered audiences and a rise in production costs result in decreasing profit margins (Carsten, 2004; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Webster, 2011). Consequently, the media market is becoming ever more concentrated with few major media actors that put commercial motives first to protect the interests of the stake holders. This news environment is characterised by limited access for newcomers and survival of the fittest. McManus (1994) refers to this situation as 'market driven journalism'.

Numerous scholars argument that the economic rationale prompts news organisations to primarily focus on cost-cutting and efficiency considerations. One way is to reduce the editorial staff, so journalists need to produce more news in less time and with less resources. Journalists' workload has increased even more due to the increasing number of pages, supplements and online editions (Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Curtin, 1999; Davies, 2008; Davis, 2000a, 2000b; De Bens and Raeymaeckers, 2010; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Lewis et al., 2006; Machill, Beiler and Schmutz, 2006). One of the consequences of this elevated workload is that 'desk journalism' increasingly substitutes active news gathering outside the newsroom. Journalists have transformed into 'information brokers' that mainly recycle existing content in a process of 'churnalism' or journalistic content production in large quantities (Davies, 2008; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Paulussen and Ugille, 2010). This statement can be exemplified by the finding of O'Neill and O'Connor (2009) and Lewis et al. (2006) that only one news source is used in 75% and 87% of news articles. Different terms are used to describe this situation, such as 'transformational process', 'cut and paste culture', 'cutting job', 'news cannibalisation', 'dog eat dog culture', 'pack journalism', 'Ninja Turtle syndrom' or 'rat pack syndrom' (Carsten, 2004; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Lewis et al., 2006; O'Neill and O'Connor, 2009).

JOURNALISTIC OUTSOURCING: PRE-PACKAGED INFORMATION

The abovementioned changes in the media sector have not created the dependency on pre-packaged news, but they have boosted it. The traditional use of news agencies' pre-packaged information has been expanded with the application of recycled news articles and moreover, public relations (pr) content (Davies, 2008; Franklin and Carlson, 2011). Yet, it is necessary to distinguish between two substantially different types of pre-packaged information. In the context of efficiency measures, news organisations increasingly replace their network of correspondents by news agencies content (Paulussen and Ugille, 2010; Jongbloed, Lauf and Negenborn, 2009; Wouters, De Swert and Walgrave, 2009). News that is 'borrowed'

from other media brands likewise has a journalistic origin. In contrast, pr content originates from non-journalistic actors and is motivated by private interests and the drive to spread free advertising. Pr-activities are sometimes described as ‘pseudo-events’ or ‘information subsidies’ because they are ‘*diced, sliced and packaged*’ to be consumed instead of produced by journalists (Franklin and Carlson, 2011, p. 50). Therefore, contrary to news agencies’ or other media content, pr material should be treated with caution when used in everyday news production (Boorstin, 1962, 1992; Curtin, 1999; Davis, 2000a; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Gandy, 1982; Machill, Beiler and Schmutz, 2006). Nonetheless, research has shown that journalists routinely incorporate pr, especially press releases or press conferences, as well as journalistic types of pre-packaged information in their news output (Van Hout and Jacobs, 2008).

NEWS AGENCIES AND MEDIA SOURCES – Buijs et al. (2009) discovered few traces of news agency (10%) and other media (12%) content. The Dutch Broadcasting Commission (Jongbloed, Lauf and Negenborn, 2009) registered a fall in articles that are literally taken from the national news agency ANP but a rise of articles that partly exist of ANP-material (27,6% in 2008). Yet, only 6.8% of these articles referred to ANP as a news source. Indeed, ample studies revealed that the use of journalistic sources is much more elevated than we can observe in the news because journalists often refrain from mentioning that information is ‘borrowed’ from other sources (Carsten, 2004; De Keyser, 2010; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Lewis et al., 2006).

PUBLIC RELATIONS SOURCES – Ample studies have shown the importance of pr sources in everyday news production (Carsten, 2004; De Keyser, 2010; Lewis et al., 2006; Machill, Beiler and Schmutz, 2006; Paulussen and Ugille, 2010). Franklin studied the importance of PR sources in different articles (2004, Franklin and Carlson, 2011) and concluded that the willingness of newsrooms to use pr content increases as their resources, and especially the number of journalists, decrease. Journalists moreover report that the use of pr content for editorial purposes has increased (Lewis et al., 2006). Still, it is a challenge to empirically measure the presence of pr content (e.g. personal contacts between journalists and pr-professionals) in the news because both parties prefer to veil their (often routine) contacts (Davis, 2000b). Besides, many press releases end up in newsrooms indirectly as news agencies or other media content in a ‘multi-staged sourcing’ process or a ‘ladder of news sourcing’ (Buijs et al., 2009; Curtin, 1999; De Keyser, 2010; Franklin and Carlson, 2011). Lewis et al. (2006) indeed found that 47% of articles that originated from press releases closely resembled news agencies content. An important remark here is that mainly news agency journalists complain about a growing work load (Lewis et al., 2006).

RE-FEUDALISATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: INFORMATION ACTORS

Scholars state that the presence of information actors in the news is linked to their efficiency to spread information and pre-packaged news. Because mainstream actors occupy the majority of financial and social resources, the growing importance of pre-packaged information, and especially press releases, might magnify their dominant

position in terms of news access even more (Curtin, 1999; Davis, 2000b; Franklin, 2004; Lewis et al., 2006). Habermas (1989) and Davis (2000a) refer to this situation as 're-feudalisation' of the public sphere. Some authors are very critical pointing that *'there is no need for a totalitarian regime when the censorship of commerce runs its blue pencil through every story'* (Davies, 2008, p.152). They identify press releases as symptoms of a 'crisis of public communication' in a 'public relations democracy' and argue that journalists renounce their democratic function as a 'watchdog' of the powerful (mainstream) actors in society and become the spokespersons of those in power. Those authors often link aspirations for commercial success with democratic failure (Buijs et al., 2009; Davies, 2008; Davis, 2000b; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Lewis et al., 2006; Machill, Beiler and Schmutz, 2006).

EXPANSION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE?

The Internet and especially Web 2.0 applications have re-opened the debate on the emancipatory potential of media use and expansion rather than shrinking of the public sphere. *"Web 2.0 is a term that was first used in 2004 to describe a new way in which software developers and end-users started to utilize the World Wide Web; that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion"* (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009, p.60-61). Some scholars witness a shift from individualistic top-down monomedia journalism to participatory multimedia journalism characterised by networked communication, a synthesis of interpersonal and mass communication where audiences and mass media producers are connected in one, networked media matrix (Castells, 2010; Hermida, 2010; Papathanassopoulos, 2011). In this new, networked society an essential role is granted to social media, *"a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content, namely (...) the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users"* (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009, p.61). Indymedia, Wordpress, Facebook or YouTube are some examples of the new possibilities for online expansion of the public sphere. Yet, research has shown that not all citizens have the possibility or abilities to disseminate or access online information (digital inequality) (Hermida, 2010; Papathanassopoulos, 2011). Therefore, we can only speak of a truly expanded public sphere if journalists incorporate this new and easily online available information in their traditional media news output. Indeed, much UGC may be available online, but it can only be powerful if it can be seminal in the traditional media content. Therefore we focus our research on the presence of social media sources and non-mainstream actors in the coverage of mainstream media.

The fact that important media brands as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal or Bloomberg have formulated policies for integrating social media sources in the traditional framework of news production, is significant (Hermida, 2010). Several case studies demonstrate the power of social media as news sources, f.i. during the

Iranian elections in June 2009 or the Mumbai terroristic attacks in the end of 2008 (Chua et al., 2011; Hermida, 2010; Lenatti, 2009; Morozov, 2009; Papathanassopoulos, 2011). Social media can offer a bypass that is vital for investigative journalism. WikiLeaks is an example of this latter case: *“Some reporters from mainstream media outlets are following the site regularly, while others have at least found their leaks newsworthy on specific occasions”* (Lynch, 2010, p.317). These specific contexts of breaking news or media restrictions contrast with everyday news production, where f.i. Lariscy et al. (2009) or Messner and South (2011) found that journalists neglect social media sources. Moreover, Web 2.0’s emancipatory potential can also be high jacked by pr-professionals that incorporate ‘social’ media in their policy (Etter et al., 2011; Lariscy et al., 2009).

METHODOLOGY

On account of the finding in the literature review that journalism scholars study the transformation of the public sphere in terms of two possible shifts, we formulate two main hypotheses as a starting point for our study:

H1 – The commercialisation of the media industry and more specifically the tendency towards cost-cutting and the rising workload result in an increasing presence of mainstream actors and pre-packaged information in the news output of traditional media brands.

H 2 – The arrival of Internet and particularly Web 2.0 applications invite for a more diverse use of journalistic sources that offers new possibilities for more balanced news access, including citizens and non-mainstream organisations.

Because the results are analysed in a comparative perspective facing popular and quality newspapers, we formulate a third hypothesis:

H3 – The impact of commercialisation and digitization is different for popular and quality newspapers.

Our quantitative content analysis of the prominent themes, sources and actors in the news output of four Flemish newspapers covers a period of 10 years (2000-2010). We chose 2000 as a reference year since at that point in time the concentration of the Flemish newspaper market resulted in an oligopoly of three dominant media groups in a situation of major competition with a bursting impact of commercial incentives as a consequence. Moreover, digital technology and content management systems have been massively introduced in Flemish newsrooms during this decade (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010). The results of this content analysis are also analysed in a comparative setting facing popular (Het Nieuwsblad and Het Laatste Nieuws) and quality (De Standaard and De Morgen) newspapers. We composed a stratified sample of 12 issues every year, resulting in a total sample of 96 issues (Wester and Selm, 2006). The study focused on foreign coverage because this is an important touch stone for the public sphere in a globalised world. The focus on

international news should also reflect the impact of cost-cutting strategies in newsrooms, foreign coverage often being one of the first victims. In total, 2229 newspaper articles were selected and analysed by a team of 10 trained coders. A coding guide and registration form¹ were developed to ensure a high level of uniformity in the coding output. A critically composed sample of 27 articles was tested for intercoder reliability with an outcome of Cohen's Kappa values ranging from 0.70 up to 1.00. Analysis was carried out using PASW Statistics 18. All reported results are significant at $p \leq 0.05$ level unless indicated otherwise.

RESULTS

A first finding suggests that Flemish journalists still find the time to produce more elaborated and time consuming news reports. In our analysis we found a limited but insignificant increase from 41.5% to 48.7% short news articles. Moreover we registered an (insignificant) increase in large articles (18.5% to 27.8%). The number of medium sized articles decreased from 40.0% to 23.5%. Nonetheless, we found significant shifts in terms of type of news article, with an increase of factual news reports (77.5% to 81.5%) combined with a decrease of the already underrepresented background news (7.9% to 7.2%) and comments (8.1 to 6.9%). This finding indeed suggests a tendency towards more 'churnalism' in the Flemish press.

PRIMARY SOURCES: INFORMATION ACTORS

On average 1 information actor (0.98) is quoted in a news article, with a slight but insignificant increase comparing 2000 (0.95) with 2010 (1.02). In 76.9% of articles, journalists quote any (47.2%) or only one (29.6%) actor. This indicates that journalists do not consider balance, in terms of reporting both sides of a story, as a major issue in their coverage. It is however important to note that article size has a significant impact on the number of quoted actors, with short articles quoting no more than 0.33 actors on average and large articles reflecting more balance by quoting 2.14 actors on average. At newspaper level, we found that the quality newspaper *De Morgen* (1.22) significantly quotes more sources on average than both popular newspapers (0.81 and 0.83). The difference between the second quality newspaper (1.02) and the popular newspapers is but significant at the $p \leq 0.1$ level.

The analysis offers partial evidence for H1 en H2. Generally taken, 2192 actors are quoted in 2229 news articles. 28.9 percent of all quoted actors are political actors, surprisingly followed by individual citizens (15.8%). As expected, government actors (15.6%), economic actors (9.5%) and experts (9.0%) complete the top 5 (table 2). The relatively low presence of media actors (4.2%) is remarkable. When focusing on the dominant (firstly quoted) information actors, the top 5 ranking is unchanged. Although this finding confirms that citizens complement institutional actors as information sources, we did not find any significant shifts through time.

(Insert table 1 about here)

H3 is confirmed as we found that institutional actors, and more specifically political and government actors, are significantly more dominant in quality than popular newspapers. This finding can be explained by the fact that quality newspapers emphasize hard news, and especially political news, more than popular newspapers do.

SECONDARY SOURCES: PRE-PACKAGED NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The mean number of sources that is referred to in a news article is 0.92, with a slight but insignificant decrease comparing 2000 (0.98) with 2010 (0.85). In 77.9% of articles, journalists mention any (43.1%) or only a single (34.8%) information source. This finding is consistent with the literature on commercialisation that states that journalists consult fewer sources because of time considerations. Of course, this finding needs to be nuanced, because survey research has shown that journalists often fail to mention their sources. We found significant differences at newspaper level in the number of reported sources (H3). The quality newspaper *De Standaard* outnumbers all other dailies with an average of 1.32 sources per article. The quality newspaper *De Morgen* and the popular newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad* follow at a distance (0.94), the second popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* is lagging far behind (0.42). Furthermore, we found that short articles significantly report less sources (0.70) on average than medium or large articles (0.98-1.30), which indicates that the tendency towards 'churnalism' especially holds true for the more factual, short news reports. Contrary to our expectations, foreign news articles (1.02) mentioned significantly more sources than foreign news with a link to the homeland Belgium (0.65).

Four different types of sources are of interest in this analysis, namely news agencies, public relations, traditional media brands and social media. On average, one on four articles refers to a news agency, which indicates the importance of wire services as pre-packaged information. Surprisingly however, we registered a significant decrease in the number of articles that mentioned one or more news agency sources, from 31.2% to 17.4%. If we look more closely at individual news agencies, we see that the drop is mainly caused by Reuters and AP. We suppose that this is a consequence of the fact that *De Morgen* (30 to 4 Reuters references) and *Het Nieuwsblad* (28 to 4 Reuters references, 43 to 7 AP references) discontinued their subscription to these wire services. An important remark is that the *Corelio* newspapers significantly report more news agency sources than the *Persgroep* newspapers do. This might indicate differences in news organisations' transparency policy. Public relations sources consist of press releases, press conferences, spokespersons or websites and are reported in 12.2% of articles, equally divided between 2000 and 2010. Yet, spokespersons make up the biggest number of references to public relations, press releases and press conferences are reported in only 30 articles (1.3%). Based on the literature, we can assume that the real number is more elevated as journalists and pr-professionals prefer to veil their often routine contacts. Traditional media sources are reported in 19.3% of articles,

equally divided between 2000 and 2010. Another confirmation of H3 is present in the finding that both quality newspapers significantly report more traditional media sources than the popular newspapers do. Although social media sources significantly rose from 2 articles in 2000 to 17 articles in 2010 (0.9% in total), we can state that their relevance in everyday news production is negligible. Thus, as far as we can observe in the news itself we can conclude that the analysis does not support H1 and H2.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This research uses a quantitative and longitudinal content analysis to examine the impact of commercialisation and digitization on journalists' sourcing practices considering the notion of public sphere (H1 en H2).

In view of secondary sources, the impact of digitization seems almost non-existent. Social media sources were mentioned in only 19 articles (0.9%) and although the analysis shows that citizens are important information actors, their importance has not grown since the introduction of Web 2.0. However, recent developments have shown that the importance of social media might especially hold true in times of breaking news and media restrictions and less in terms of everyday news production. Therefore, a case study approach of certain types of news events with an important role awarded to social media (e.g. 'Arab Spring') might increase our understanding of sourcing practices in a digitized news environment.

Likewise, we registered little to no rise of pre-packaged information and institutional actors. Nonetheless, the low reported use of secondary sources, and especially press releases (0.9%), is questionable. In view of the literature we can expect that journalists often fail to mention their sources and thus, the real use of secondary sources might be much more elevated than we could observe. Further and more in-depth research (input-output analysis) is required here. The privileged news access of political actors, government, companies and experts, as described in the literature, is confirmed in our analysis. Yet, the relatively low presence of media actors is surprising but can be explained by the fact that journalists often fail to mention their media sources.

At newspaper level (H3) we did find some remarkable differences. First, the analysis shows that the quality newspapers refer more to secondary sources and quote more information actors than the popular newspapers do. This suggests that Flemish quality dailies still adhere to a certain level of balance and information checking more than their popular counterparts. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that also news organisations' different policies may play a role in the implementation of sourcing practices. Moreover, Hallin and Manicini (2004) suggest that journalism culture also influences newsrooms' sourcing practices. Therefore, we will extend our research by comparing French and Dutch language newspapers in Belgium.

Our analysis applies to Flemish journalism and cannot be generalised to journalism practice in general. It is clear that little or no shrinking or expansion of the public sphere due to commercialisation or digitization of the media sector could be

detected. One possible explanation is that our time interval (2000-2010) is too limited. Therefore, we will extend the scope of the research with an interval of 5 years including 1995 and 2005 in the analysis. Another possible explanation is that Flemish journalists stand firm in a changing news environment. The new possibilities for information gathering offered by Web 2.0 applications have not yet penetrated to them but their coverage shows a relatively high amount of balance between different information actors and between copy-paste pieces and in-depth news coverage.

NOTES

¹ For more information about the choice of newspapers and the methodology of the study, contact the authors.

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Table 1. Overview of actors quoted in 4 Flemish newspapers (2000-2010) (N=2192)

Ranking	Type of actor	Times quoted	% quoted
1	Political actor (I)	633	28.9
2	Individual citizen (NI)	347	15.8
3	Government actor (I)	342	15.6
4	Economic actor (I)	209	9.5
5	Expert (I)	198	9.0
6	Non-institutional movement (NI)	173	7.9
7	Other mainstreamactor (I)	123	5.6
8	Media actor (I)	92	4.2
9	Socio-economic actor (I)	38	1.7
10	Other	37	1.7
	TOTAL	2192	100.0